



Rethinking Adoption in the 21st Century: Progressing from 'Child Placement' to 'Family Success'

Let's Talk Adoption Conference – May 4, 2019

National Center on Adoption and Permanency

www.ncap-us.org

Adam Pertman, President

apertman@ncap-us.org

National Center on Adoption and Permanency Our Vision: Successful Families for All Children

The **National Center on Adoption and Permanency** (NCAP) is a unique “one-stop” organization that provides a broad range of information, resources and multidisciplinary services relating to adoption, foster care and child welfare.



NCAP's mission is not only to achieve permanency for all children – in families of origin when possible and in new ones when necessary – but also to reshape policy and practice to enable those children and their families to succeed.

Our Strength is in Our People and Services

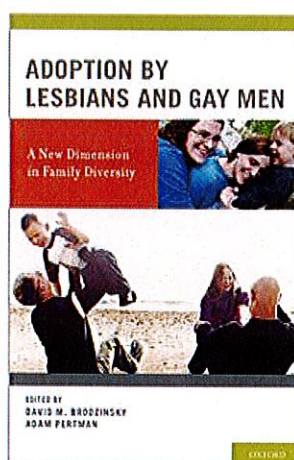
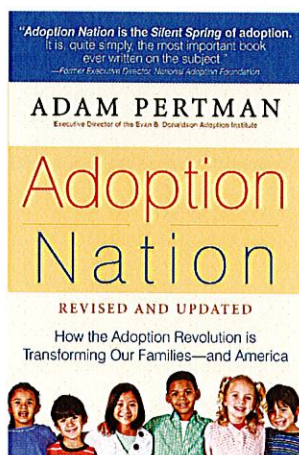
NCAP is led by President Adam Pertman, former head of the Donaldson Adoption Institute; Executive Director Allison Maxon, former Division Director of Kinship Center; and Research Director Joyce Taylor, PhD, Springfield College and Yale University.

Our work includes:

- Research, evaluation, program & project development, consultation
- Board development, consultation and/or executive transition planning
- Staff development and training to improve clinical and practice competence
- Parent/caregiver training for families with children with histories of trauma
- Communications: writing, editing, print, web/social media, script consulting, etc.
- Consultation on development and fundraising, as well as community relations
- Conference/event consulting, including keynote speakers, other presenters
- Executive training/coaching, policy development/analysis, practice protocols

To learn more about our people and our services, please write to Adam at apertman@ncap-us.org, call him at 617-903-0554 or go to: www.ncap-us.org.

A Couple of Books of Interest (to me, at least)



What We Know . . . About Everyone

“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness.”

— Alex Haley in *Roots*

What We Know . . . About Adoption

- How many children are adopted in or into the United States each year?
a). 85,000 b). 125,000 c). 175,000
- Of the three “categories” of adoption in the U.S., which one occurs most?
a). International b) Foster care c). Domestic infants
- How many people in our country have adoption in their immediate families?
a). 45 million b). 85 million c). 100 million

Adoption in America: A Brief History

- For generations, “formal adoption” meant unwed mothers, white babies, white married couples
- Secrecy, stigma and shame characterized the process and all of its participants
- Acceptance of single mothers, legalization of abortion, birth control instigate major changes
- World events fill the gap, most notably Soviet Union dissolves and China imposes a one-child policy
- Paradigm in foster care shifts to “best interests of the child” as defined by permanency

So . . . What Has Changed?



A Shift in Understanding and Practice 1950s . . . and . . . Today

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Secrecy “protects” members of the triad ➤ Birthparents told to go on with their lives as if nothing happened ➤ Adoptive parents feel entitlement and are protected from intrusion ➤ Adoptees assumed not to have adoption-related issues, so nothing to do | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ More openness & honesty in all types of adoptions ➤ Most first/birth parents want openness and are usually helped by it ➤ With more openness, adoptive parents feel more entitlement and less fear ➤ Adopted persons benefit from knowing about and contact with birth families |
|---|--|

Fitting a Square Peg into a Round Hole Then . . . and . . . Now

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Denial of difference between adoptive, bio families ➤ Match for race, physical traits > adoption undetectable ➤ “Chosen child” – it was a “win-win” for all parties! ➤ Agencies did not “interfere” after finalization ➤ Minimize importance of adoption in child’s identity ➤ Searching viewed as a sign of maladjustment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Acknowledgement of difference is healthy ➤ Diversity in families makes adoption conspicuous ➤ Focus on helping deal with loss and other issues ➤ Professional support is important or even vital ➤ Adoption is recognized as part of identity ➤ Desire for information and connection seen as normal |
|--|---|

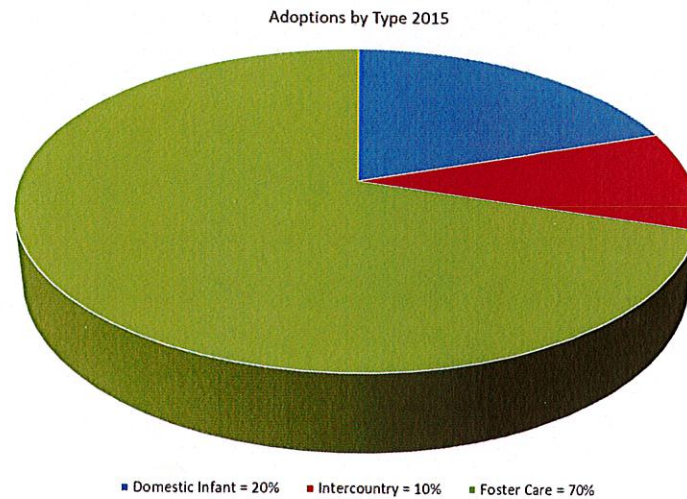
A Result of the Adoption's Greater Openness & Honesty: More Complexity

- When do we tell our child she's adopted?
- Who are the members of your family?
- **Remember: Only adoptive families are complicated and have issues – as opposed to say ... step-families, divorced families, grandparent-led families, single-parent families, families with two dads or two moms, families with children who have special needs ...**

Where We Are Today

- Fewer than 1% of single women voluntarily place their children for adoption, and most become their parents.
- Stigma, secrets, embarrassment and shame are lifting; we're not there yet, but move is to greater openness and honesty.
- Laws, policies, practices and attitudes shifting; we're not there yet, but improving as we learn about adoption's realities.
- Adoption today is still commonly understood as child placement – so most people still don't know much about the people involved (especially birthmothers), their needs, etc.
- **The adults adopting today are straight and gay, come in all colors, are married and cohabitating and single, young and old – and most children being adopted are not white infants.**

Non-Step-Parent Adoptions by Type

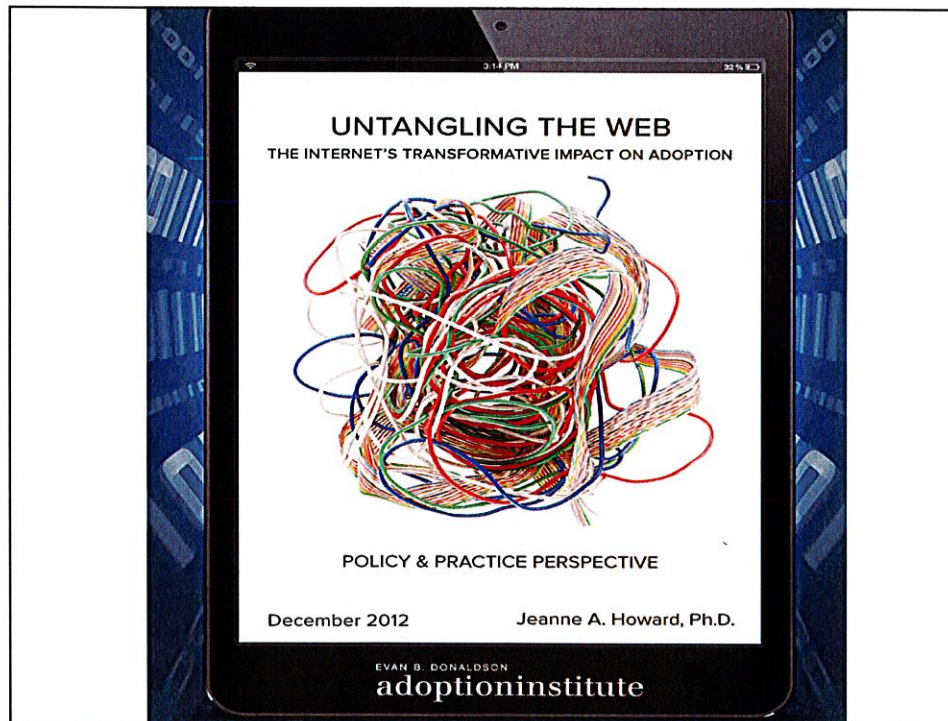


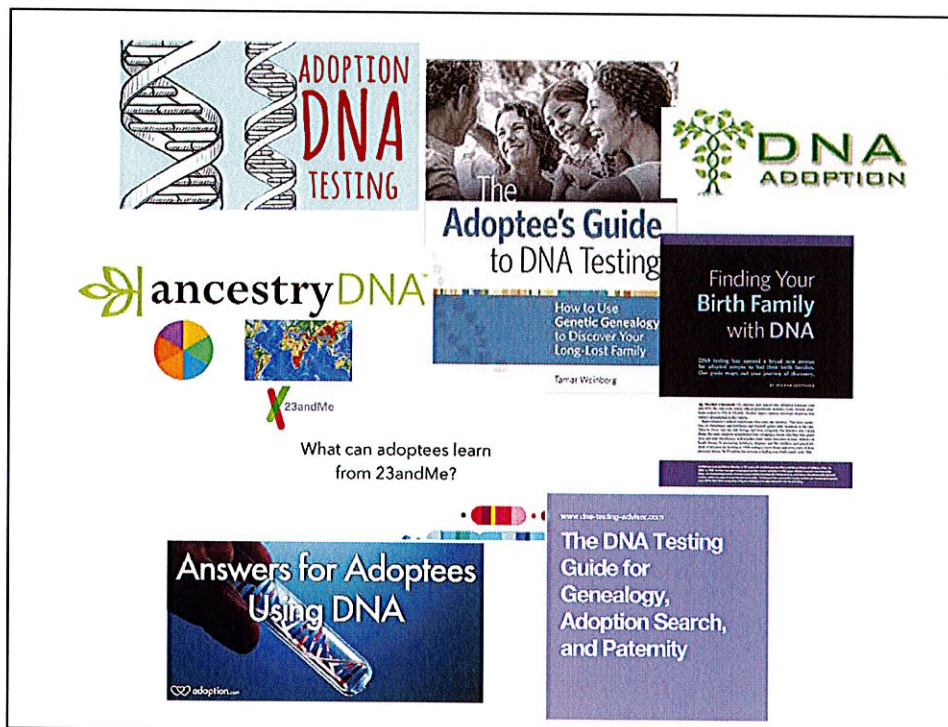
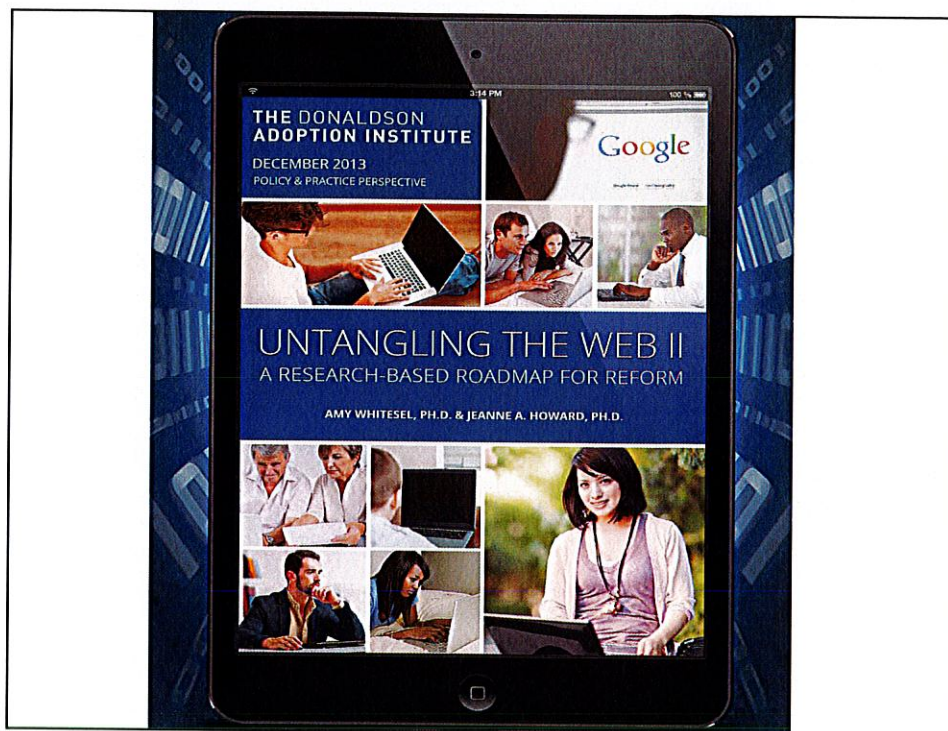
Some Bottom Lines

- There's greater/growing openness and honesty in all types of adoption. Do we know how to do it?
- Adoption has contributed to historic changes in perceptions/understandings of what families are, how they are formed, what they look like, etc.
- **The vast majority of adoptions are now of children who were abused, neglected or institutionalized before adoption** (see the pie chart).
- Most laws, policies and practices in place today were created for a world that no longer exists.

Historic Shifts, Systemic Impact

- About 125,000 adoptions in U.S. a year
 - * About 40% stepparent adoptions
 - * 50,000 child welfare adoptions
 - * 6,000 international adoptions (fell dramatically in last few years)
 - * 14,000 domestic infants (decreased tenfold since 1970)
- **The real numbers: a far bigger population**
- Overall, 40% of adoptions in U.S. are trans-racial/ethnic
 - * 28 percent from foster care
 - * 21 percent of domestic infants
 - * 84 percent from other nations
- Reality on ground (records, LGBT, etc.) outpacing law, policy
- Now the internet and genetic testing are changing everything





For Now, More Questions than Answers

- Adoption Practice: What's the impact on ethical professionals when internet providers promise babies quickly and incentives to pregnant women?
- Search and Reunion: What should professionals tell clients? What should parents tell their kids? What guidance, support, resources does everyone need?
- Law and Policy: How do we address possibly unsafe or traumatizing contacts for children? Do legal obstacles to acquiring information make sense?
- More and More: How do we best utilize all the new opportunities, resources, research and supports?

Openness in Adoption: From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections

EVAN B. DONALDSON
adoptioninstitute



Principal Findings for Infant Adoptions

- Only 5% are closed; 95% of agencies offer open.
- In vast majority, expectant mothers (and fathers) meet and pick the adoptive parents.
- **Greater openness is associated with more satisfaction by all parties with adoption process.**
- First/Birth mothers: less grief, more peace of mind (but also more opportunity for exploitation).
- Adoptive parents: positive experience, comfort.
- Adoptees: biggest beneficiaries, and teens with contact are most satisfied with level of openness.

Important Factors for Achieving Success

- Shared understanding by birth, adoptive parents about open adoption's realities/ complexities.
- Foundational relationship qualities and values are ideals for the parties in open relationships.
- Ability to exercise self-determination in choosing and shaping open relationships.
- "Collaborative" communication to plan contact, convey needs; also, post-adoption services.

Primary Recommendations

- All parents should get counseling and training.
- Decision-making embedded in ethical practice to maximize self-determination, full disclosure.
- **All parents should be offered post-adoption services for openness-related challenges.**
- Additional research to better understand factors that promote successful open adoptions and ways practitioners can support them.

Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services



Background and Context

- Adoption is commonly understood as placement.
- Vast majority adjust well; high family satisfaction.
- These children were maltreated **before** adoption.
- Vast majority meet “special needs” criteria.
- Children’s issues often don’t manifest until school.
- Many parents do not get preparation, resources.

The Good News from Parents

- Only 15 percent report relationship with their children is more difficult than expected. (National Survey of Adoptive Parents)
- Over 90 percent in any type of adoption are satisfied with their experience. (Howard & Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994)
- Most parents feel very close to children: 83 percent CW, 87-90 percent biological, int’l, infant. (Howard, Smith & Ryan, 2004)

The Challenges

- Utilization of clinical services by adoptive families is triple rate reported by birth families.
- Over 1/3 of adopted children receive at least one type of counseling or mental health service. (National Survey of Adoptive Parents)
- Behavior problems for many of these children and youth are chronic.
- Underlying emotional issues drive behaviors.

27
27

Principal Findings

- Most adoptees come to families with higher risks for a variety of challenges/problems.
- Adoptive families utilize clinical services at a very high rate. **Is that a bad thing?**
- The layers of issues and dynamics are often not understood by parents, professionals.
- Adoption-competent therapy is most-often sought, but – like other services -- is lacking.

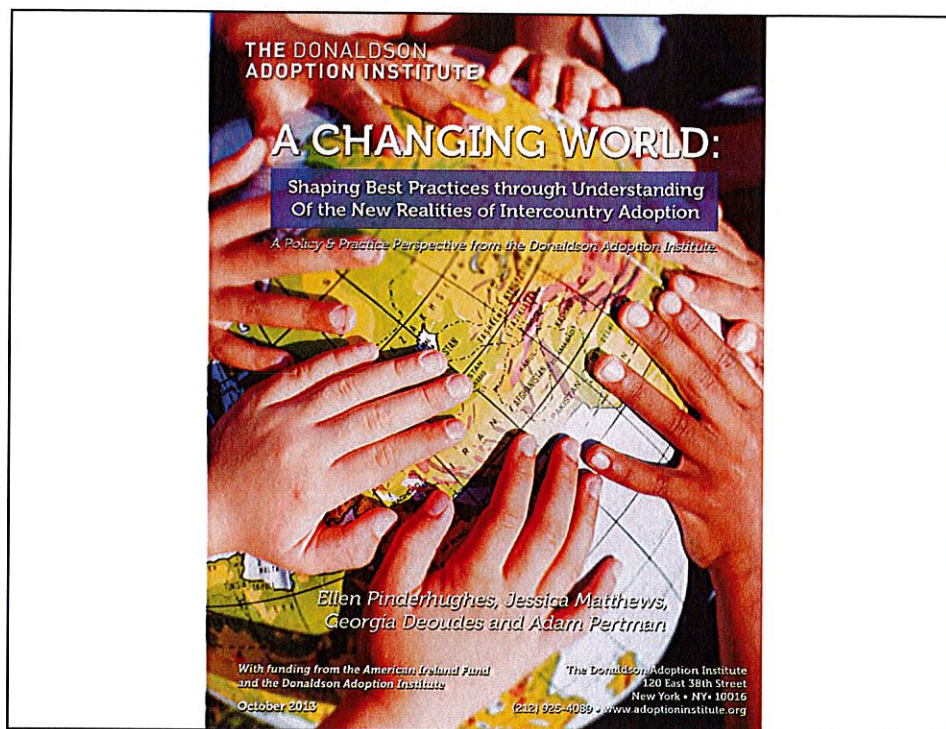
The Right Thing for Many Reasons

We should be helping these children and families . . . well, because it's the ethical and moral thing to do in a civilized society . . . but here are other arguments:

- Each adoption from care saves governments an average of \$143k. (Barth, et al, 2006)
- Successful adoptions from care save money in human services and reduced crime, totaling \$302,418 per adoption. (Hansen, 2007)

Primary Recommendations

- National task force for post-adoption services.
- Private/ public partnerships (including dedicated federal funding) to maximize services and access.
- Public policy, child welfare officials use budgets, resources to focus on helping families succeed, with PA services part of the picture at all levels.
- Funded research should increase significantly.
- Curricula for professionals working with families.



A Lay of the Land: Background and Context

- Intercountry adoptions are plummeting into the U.S. (23,000 in 2004 to 4,700 in 2017) and globally (45,000 in 2004 to fewer than 20,000 today)
- Countries of origin are changing – Russia and Guatemala are not available, more from Ethiopia.
- Wait times are growing longer – China, for example, can take 3-5 years – so children are older.
- Many parents motivated (to varying degrees) by desire to avoid issues relating to families of origin.

The Research

- Parent survey of 1,034 adopters from 22 countries, most from U.S. but also Ireland, Canada, UK, Australia, Germany, Italy and China. They adopted children from 51 nations, including China (27%), Ethiopia (16%), Guatemala (16%) and Russia (13%).
- Professional survey of 204 professionals, 55 identified from 16 countries of origin (China 25%, Ethiopia 25%,) and the rest from 8 receiving nations (mostly U.S. but also Ireland, Australia, Canada, etc.).
- Interviews with adoption policy-makers in 12 receiving (Australia, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, U.S., etc.) and 7 countries of origin (Colombia, India, Nigeria, etc.)

Principal Findings

- More children are being institutionalized for longer, incurring more developmental and psychic harm and diminishing their prospects of ever getting families.
- Most countries of origin are allowing ICA primarily or exclusively for children who have special needs, are older or are placed with their sibling groups.
- International open adoption is growing as adoptive parents change their minds about and seek contact with members of families of origin.
- Among U.S. children being adopted by parents in other countries are girls and boys from foster care – a phenomenon American officials are encouraging.

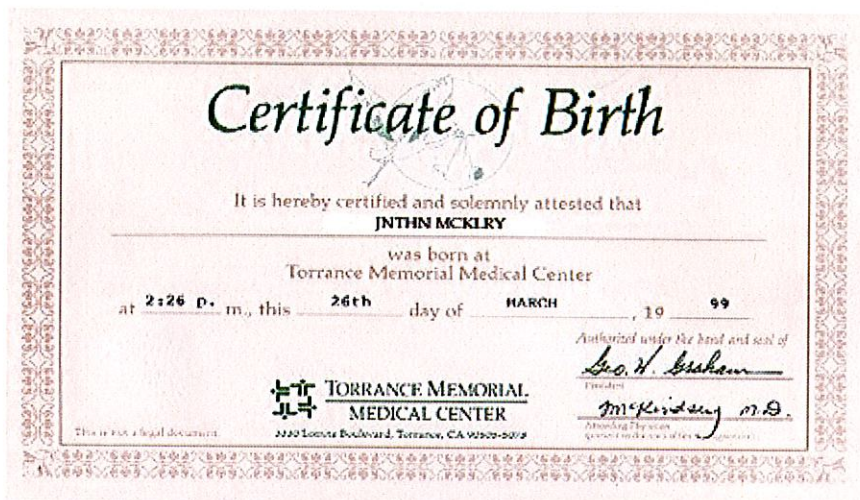
Principal Findings (cont.)

- The Hague has encouraged more transparency and consistency, and has also increased a focus on the best interests and protection of children.
- Professionals in one country and in other studies report that bribery and other corruption appear to be occurring at higher bureaucratic levels.
- While intent is to keep children in home nations when possible, some biological relatives cannot meet their countries' standards, and therefore cannot adopt.
- Even as overall ICA numbers are dropping, the costs of the process are rising – sometimes to \$50k and higher.

Conclusion

Intercountry adoption is transforming from a robust but largely unmonitored process through which infants moved into new families, into a smaller but better-regulated system serving primarily children who are older and/or have special needs. At the same time, millions of children of all ages remain institutionalized around the globe, many if not most with minimal prospects beyond survival. Greater knowledge is critical to shaping and improving the laws, policies and practices that are ostensibly designed, first and foremost, to serve children's interests and to enhance their prospects for better lives.

For the Records: Restoring a Legal Right



Principal Findings

- Adopted persons: only class in U.S. not routinely permitted to access own original birth certificates.
- Denial of information on background has potentially serious consequences for physical, mental health.
- No evidence of negative consequences in states where birth certificates have been unsealed.
- Few vetoes or “do not contact” forms filed in states where those opportunities are provided.
- Abortions don’t increase, adoptions don’t decrease.
- Scant evidence (if any) that pregnant women were legally promised lifelong anonymity – or wanted it.

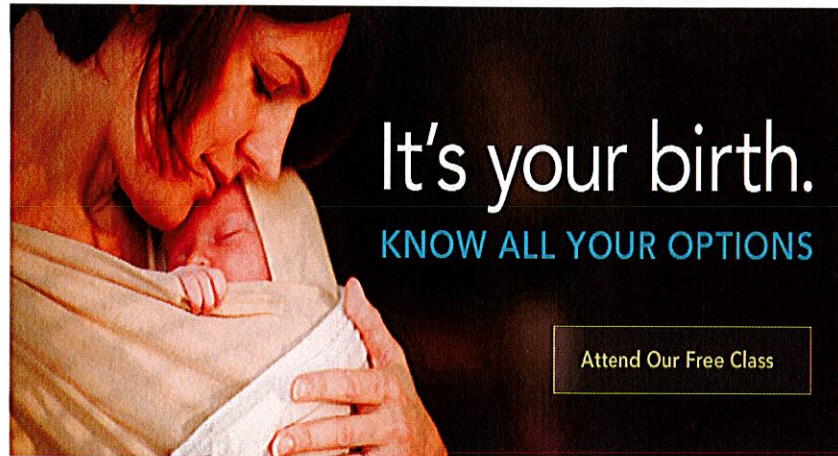
For the Records: Recommendations

- Amend state laws to restore unrestricted access for adult adopted persons to OBC's.
- Within three years' of enactment, revisit state laws that permit only limited access.
- Conduct research to expand understanding of experiences of all affected parties.
- Build on experiences of states that permit access to expand adopted people's rights to learn more from agency and court records.
- Develop education programs, focus more public and policy attention on state and national levels.

Random Thoughts and Conclusions

- Adopted people are not stalkers, ingrates or children in search of new mommies and daddies.
- Most laws are predicated on the underlying concern (or belief) something bad will happen.
- No one wants to live forever with decisions at 17.
- Sealing OBC's is a negative signal from the start.
- **Bottom line: Restoring access to OBCs is not just about curiosity, search, reunion or medical information; it's a matter of human dignity and social justice.**

Safeguarding the Rights & Well-Being of Birth/First Parents in Adoption



Major Findings

- Approximately 14,000 infant adoptions a year
- Birth/first mothers: very diverse group; only about 1/4 are teens, biggest segment in their 20s
- Recent research only on teen who relinquish
- Very few “closed” adoptions today
- Birth/first fathers involved in minority of adoptions
- Better outcomes related to not feeling pressured to relinquish, ability to choose the adoptive family, ongoing contact/ knowledge of child’s well-being

Major Findings (cont.)

- Counseling is not required in most states
- Parents need time after birth to reconsider adoption and time after relinquishment to reflect on decision
- In half of the states, irrevocable consent can be established in 4 days after birth or less; 17 states have a revocation period
- Women with highest grief levels placed children expecting information or contact that was cut off
- 13 states have laws to enforce post-adoption contact agreements in infant adoptions

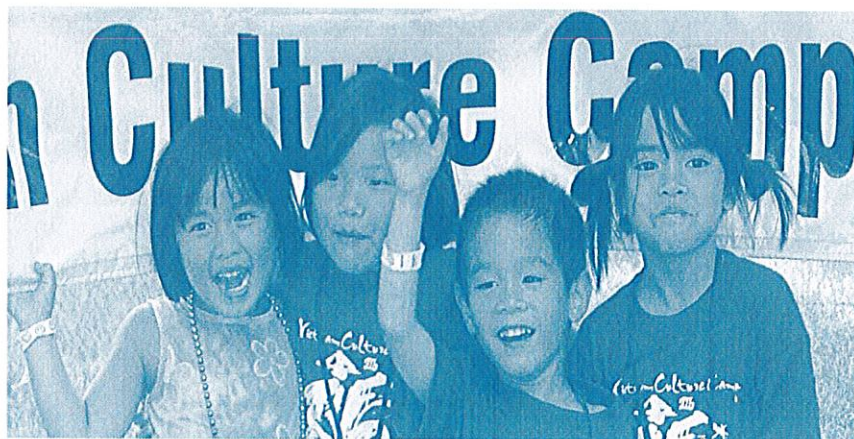
Critical Needs and Rights

- To be fully informed from the start about all options, rights and resources
- To make decisions throughout the process free from coercion or pressure
- To receive nondirective counseling and separate legal representation
- To be able to change her mind at any point before consent becomes legally binding
- To be legally assured that agreements to information or contact are adhered to

Primary Recommendations

- Establish legally enforceable post-adoption contact agreements & permit access to records
- Require document defining birth/first parent rights
- Require at least two counseling sessions
- Modify laws to have waiting period of 4 to 7 days before signing, plus substantial revocation period
- More aggressive protection of fathers' rights
- Further research to identify first/birth parents' needs and services/laws to address them
- Develop and provide post-adoption services

Beyond Culture Camp: Shaping Positive Identity in Adoption



Key Findings re: Adopted People

- Adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity as they age, including as adults.
- Race/ethnicity is increasingly significant aspect of identity in adoption across color/culture.
- Coping with discrimination is important in coming to terms with racial/ethnic identity.
- Discrimination based on adoption is a reality, but more so Whites (i.e., race trumps adoption).

Key Findings (cont.)

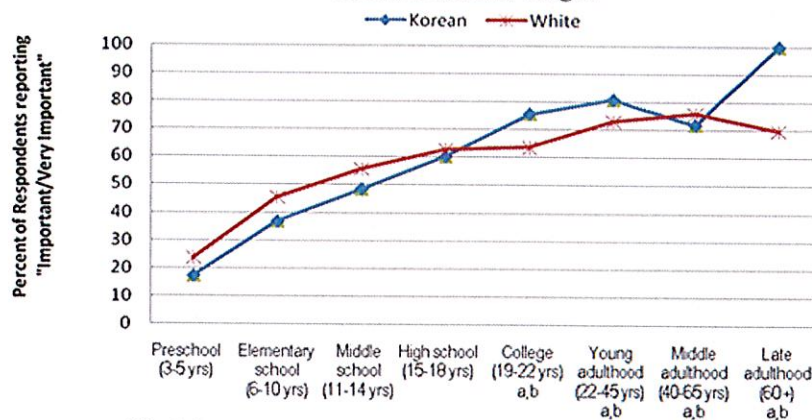
- Most transracial adoptees considered themselves White or wanted to be White as children.
- Positive racial/ethnic identity development is most effectively facilitated by “lived” experiences.
- White respondents: contact with birth relatives is most helpful factor for positive adoptive identity.
- Transracial adoptees: travel to home country, is most helpful factor for achieving positive identity.

Sources of Discrimination

Source	Korean/Transracial Adoptees N=179		White Adoptees N=156	
	ADOPTION	RACE/ETHNICITY	ADOPTION	RACE/ETHNICITY
	Sometimes/ Fairly often/Very often	Sometimes/ Fairly often/Very often	Sometimes/ Fairly often/Very often	Sometimes/ Fairly often/Very often
	%	%	%	%
Childhood friends	15	48	28	8
Childhood friend's parents	11	38	24	5
Classmates	25	75	9	7
Teachers	13	39	21	8
Partner (s)	8	22	12	3
Parent partner(s)	16	30	19	6
Coworkers	11	33	10	3
Employers	7	33	8	5
Extended family	21	33	40	6
Stranger	31	80	24	10

Importance of Adoptive Identity at Different Life Stages

Fig. 1. Importance of Identity as an Adopted Person at Different Life Stages

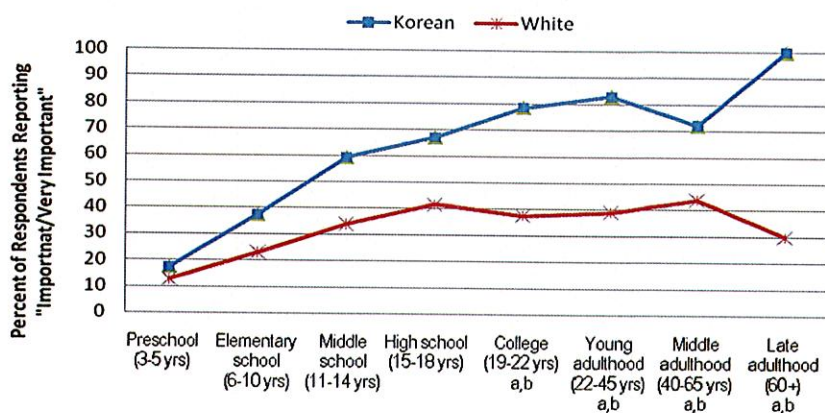


^a Use of valid percents Whites: College (N=154), Young adulthood (N=153), Middle adulthood (N=100), Late adulthood (N=10)

^b Use of valid percents Koreans: College (N=173), Young adulthood (N=146), Middle adulthood (N=25), Late adulthood (N=1)

Importance of Racial/Ethnic Identity at Different Life Stages

Fig. 2. Importance of Racial/Ethnic Identity at Different Life Stages



^a Use of valid percents. Whites: College (N=154); Young adulthood (N=153); Middle adulthood (N=100); Late adulthood (N=10).

^b Use of valid percents. Koreans: College (N=173); Young adulthood (N=146); Middle adulthood (N=25); Late adulthood (N=1).

Experiences and Services Utilized, Perceived as Helpful in Forming Identity

Source	Korean Adoptees		White Adoptees	
	% Utilized	% Helpful	% Utilized	% Helpful
Travel to birth country ^b	62	74	57	45
Attend racially diverse schools ^{a,b}	65	73	51	42
Having child care providers, teachers, adult role models same race/ethnicity	41	73	65	58
Family travel to culturally significant places ^b	53	72	53	54
Read information from Internet ^b	79	71	75	62
Live in racially diverse neighborhood ^{a,b}	65	70	44	53
Books/Articles on adoption ^b	73	68	75	66
Cook food or dine at restaurants ^b	84	68	77	54
Regular contact with people of same race/ethnicity ^b	74	67	75	51
Exposure to multi-cultural entertainment	68	64	70	55
Take classes learn history/culture of birth country ^b	49	64	46	30
Having siblings ^a	80	63	70	68
Events by adult adoptees/adult adoptee organizations ^{a,b}	62	63	42	47
Support group for adoptees ^b	51	62	46	50
Involve ethnically diverse religious, social groups/activities ^b	59	62	54	40
Culture camp ^{a,b}	48	61	12	15
Study birth language ^{a,b}	56	59	44	43
Events sponsored by own ethnic group ^{a,b}	62	55	31	28
Have traditional objects (dolls etc.) from birth country ^{a,b}	72	49	55	37
Having contact with birth relatives ^{a,b}	30	47	45	72
Study martial art, traditional dance etc.	41	38	51	31

In their own voices

“Never having my family acknowledge that I was different made it difficult to come to terms with understanding/ accepting I really was NOT white.”

“I felt like a banana most of my life. In other words, racially Chinese due to my skin. But in terms of my inner values and cultural identity I felt very much Caucasian due to my upbringing within my adoptive family. I still feel this way.”

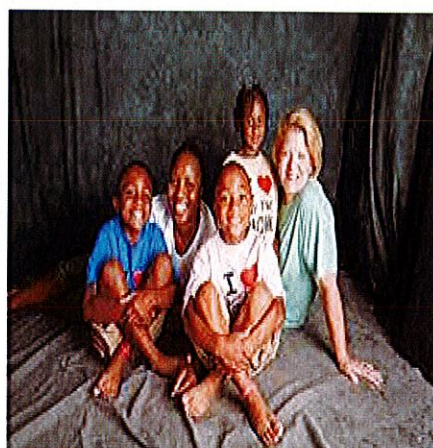
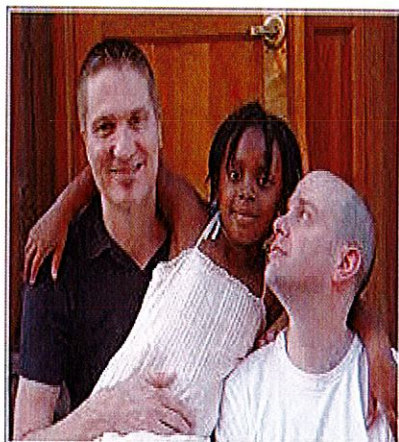
Related/Relevant Findings (Safeguarding Birthparents and Beyond Culture Camp)

- Primary factor for first/birth mothers’ peace of mind is knowledge about children’s well-being.
- Vast majority of mothers want info about or contact with children they relinquished.
- Medical, cultural, adoption, etc. information can be critically important to positive identity.
- Such info is the raw material to fill missing pieces of life and derive integrated sense of self.

Recommendations

- Expand parental preparation and post-placement support for those adopting across race/ culture.
- Develop empirically based practices, resources to prepare TRA youth to cope with racial bias.
- Promote laws, policies, practices that facilitate access to information for adopted individuals.
- Educate teachers, docs, practitioners, media, etc.
- Increase research on risk and protective factors.

Expanding Resources for Children



The Realities and the Need

- Over 100,000 children legally free to be adopted from foster care.
- Most are older, disproportionately minorities and have been in care for a long time.
- The population of waiting children far exceeds that of parental applicants.
- Children who “age out” without permanency face multiple, serious challenges.

Expanding the Pool

- Studies indicate positive outcomes for children with gay/lesbian parents
- These potential parents are more likely to adopt children with special needs
- Few bans, but laws and practices often ignore or discourage this potential resource
- The latest trend: Religious exemptions that aim at LGBT parents (and others)

Recommendations

- End legal and de facto restrictions.
- Expand co- and second-parent adoption.
- Revise agency policies and practices.
- Be welcoming, end “don’t ask, don’t tell.”
- Raise awareness of bias among personnel.
- Develop policies, outreach to LGBT communities.
- Affirm the value of gay/lesbian-headed families.
- Conduct research on resources, training, etc.
- Include children in decision-making.

Into the Future: What We Know Will Happen (Almost) for Sure



- The era of closed adoption will come to an end.
- Extended Family of Adoption will continue to expand.
- Need for services – and family success model – will grow.
- The big majority of adoptions will not be of infants.
- Search and reunion will be routine and expected.
- The internet will enable great and awful practices.

The Best Way to Predict the Future . . .



. . . is to Create It

The future for child welfare in the U.S. should include:

- Supports and services to keep families of origin intact, while minimizing temporary or institutional care (in all countries).
- Effective supports and services to help all children and families from the start and throughout the developmental cycle.

How Do We Get There?



- Educate parents to understand that seeking help is a strength.
- Learn and teach about the impact of the internet/DNA testing.
- Reshape agency practices in the “family success” model – and advocate for systemic changes in policy and practice.

Bottom line: We need to reshape child welfare policy and practice into a new paradigm, one in which the ultimate goal is not just child placement but, instead, is enabling all families to succeed.

- **We can do this!**



"Oh, I'm sorry. . . You couldn't adopt?"